PRICELESS MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE GOBI DESERT

Account of the Treasure Dr. Mark Aurel Stein Found Amid the Wastes of Central Asia

Notable Documents Unearthed---Hidden for Centuries in the Shrine of the Thousand Buddhas

All this was the find of a schoolmaster out of India, and all it cost him was the best toes of that right foot which he kept steadily putting where it belongs, for there is excellent authority for believing that the right place for all right feet is foremost. The right foot leading and the left foot keeping pace the schoolmaster passed out of India and into the valley of Swat, which half unbelieving people are most likely to recall as the dominion of a certain Akhoond best known by a ribald tirenody. And out from Swat he passed into the great desert lands of inner Asia, into Lop-nor and that great desert of Gobi which even the school geography books have included in their maps. Out in that desert he unearthed such treasure as has never befallen any one man before him.

Now if a schoolmaster from anywhere had closed the door of his schoolhouse and had walked into the discovery of half so much as a small fragment of one of Livy's lost decades or a few tattered lines which by emendations or varied readings might be identified as one of the lyrics which Sappho had not burned, the reward of that schoolmaster would have been fame in its largest measure. But here is an Indian schoolmaster who has found a whole library of antiquity where others have found fragments, who has unearthed the earliest known manuscript of the Sanskrit, who has given to the world the only complete confession of one of its great dead religions, who has found a new language and has put it in the way of being read and studied, who has collected the gossipy notes which soldiers exchanged from tower to tower along the great Chinese wall, not the great wall of China familiar in pictures but a still greater wall further out in the desert and so ancient that all memory of it has passed from the minds of men, even of Chinamen who knew all things when Caucasians were yet barbarians.

Discovery thus by wholesale should make any man famous, yet it has scarcely caused a ripple outside the circle of a few enthusiasts. It calls for a wisdom too deep to be stirred in the mind of folk who have small Latin and less Greek and at the back of all this a dim comprehension that the Sanskrit has roots, and of such is philology.

This schoolmaster out of India who has done this great work is Dr. Mark Aurel Stein. He was born at Budapest in 1862, but England has been his home, and to the great Indian Empire he has given his years of service. As schoolmaster he served his time until his merit was recognized, then he went up the ladder to become inspector with yet greater and graver duties until he was put in charge over districts and provinces and became a great power in the educational system of the whole peninsula. Mountain climbing was his delight—that is what cost him toes at the end of this great exploration; he conquered the unknown glaciers of Nan-shan on his way out of the desert and in his descent to India by way of Leh-Ladak his toes were frost bitten and he had to be carried down dangerous slopes to the nearest medical assistance and the mercy of the knife.

But it was the desert sand which yielded Dr. Stein its treasure; the mountain peaks and rivers of slowly groaning ice were but his diversion as they came upon his way in reaching and in leaving the dead plains north of the Himalayas where the sand dances death and light inexorable burial to every living thing. There are problems here for the physical geographer: what has happened to this heart of Asia to produce this intense desiccation is unknown. But the march of the mountains of sand westward uncloses for a day and to-morrow conceals once more the abodes of dead men, the shrines of dead gods, the sere stems of gray mulberries which once shaded gardens of green delight, all the mute memorials of a vanished culture.

This was desert when Ser Marco Polo braved his dangerous way to far Cathay. This was desert when Hsüan-tsang forced the Himalayan peaks on his pious journey laden with the creed and the ritual of Buddha on his way to China. This was desert when the great Corean general Kao Hsien-chih led his Chinese army in victory over the Pamirs and for the first time and the last in all history delivered that threat upon India which is an ever present fear in Delhi at the seat of the Raj lest the Russians may repeat it.

This was desert when, as Ptolemy quotes from Marinus of Tyre, "Maes, a Macedonian, also called Titianus, and a merchant by hereditary profession," sent his caravans to the capital of China. Desert it was when Alexander drove his army athwart Asia to the gate of India and the West first in our history faced the East, a visit futile in all result save that it gave the storied East yet one more story, the myth of the two horned Alexander. Yet this desert, thanks to Dr. Stein's explorations, we now know to have been a seat of great culture when the world was young.

It was then and later one of the great highways of the world. The luxury of imperial Rome was lavish; it would wrap itself in nothing of coarser texture than the finest silk. Before the barbarian broke over Alps and Apennines on his errand of havoc the banks of the Tiber were the market for the product of Chinese looms, half the world away.

Careless of all else so long as they had the silk for their robes and for the decorations of their stately homes, the Romans never asked about the detail of the long caravans toiling across unknown deserts bringing the dainty bales from the lands of the Seres; they did not even know of what silk was made. One guess describes it as woven wind. Ammianus Marcellinus thought he had the right explanation when he described the Seres as "a sedate and gentle people, passing their happy days in the most perfect tranquillity and delightful leisure, amid shady groves, fanned by gentle breezes; these groves produce fleeces of downy wool which after being sprinkled with water is combed off in the finest threads and woven into silk."

On this great highway of luxury and trade Dr. Stein had the happy chance to stumble on a bale of this silk where it had been left by some careless camel driver almost 2,000 years ago. It was a light roll, so brittle that it broke when lifted, a bolt of yellow silk nineteen inches wide, a measure corresponding with the ancient cubit, but it was one of the original packages of the trade which for ages had streamed across this land of the great thirst.

China, even then a great nation, protected the caravan route. Its troops were stationed far out upon the desert: their watch towers still stand in weather-beaten ruin out of the sand which has destroyed and at the same time has preserved them. These watch towers yielded rich returns to exploration in the dunes with which they were partially covered.

In the ruins of the ancient guard houses, in the rubbish heaps which rose beside them, Dr. Stein unearthed hundreds of written documents illustrating all the routine of military life at the beginning of the Christian era, and thence onward for several hundred years when Europe was the hunting ground of the barbarians. These documents carry orders from distant brigadiers to the officers commanding these remote outposts, they show the movement of troops and of supplies, there are passes for the soldiers leaving barracks, there are writs of levy, there are warrants for equipment. Two thousand years ago there was as much paper work in the Chinese army as would satisfy an adjutant-general's staff in these days. Only it was not paper. These documents and returns are all on wood very carefully adapted to the purpose for which it was designed.

A common type of these documents is shaped like a knife blade in two matching tablets obtained by slitting a billet along the grain. The two facing sides were rubbed smooth and served as the surface on which the communication was written. A hole was bored through the two tablets near the sharpened point, and through this hole a double cord was passed and the ends brought through the bight before drawing tight. The cords were then brought toward the upper end of the tablet, where a place was left to receive them.

On the upper tablet a deep score was whittled out to provide a chamber for the receipt of the seal which authenticated the writing and at the same time preserved it from unauthorized reading. In this seal chamber and equally upon the under tablet three scores were cut for the reception of the cord so that it might not slip. The seal of clay was pressed down upon the triple passage of the cord across the upper tablet in the chamber prepared for it, upon the soft clay was impressed the signet, and then the contents could be seen only by cutting the cord or breaking the seal. The address seems commonly to have been written on the upper tablet above the seal chamber, and similarly placed upon the under tablet there is frequently found the name of the messenger or directions to guide him on his way. The signets with which these seals were marked vary between the Chinese lapidary script or imitations more or less effective of classic Greek models, one in particular reproducing the Athene Promachos.

Documents of more permanent importance, muniments and title deeds, were similarly inscribed on larger rectangular slips of wood. In these the original billet was not rived from end to end, but the lower plate was left with a lug at each end which held the upper plate secure when put into position between them. After the surfaces had been written upon the two plates were set together and sealed by a similar device of hempen cord and clay seal set in a depressed chamber. For still further protection of the signet imprint the tablets were wrapped in silk.

In one site opened at Lop-nor Dr. Stein hit upon an archive of such documents, no less than three dozen tablets of all sizes hidden away in a carefully concealed cavity within a wall. These were all written in the Kharoshthi script and addressed to one Cohjbo Sojaka, now but a name newly revealed out of the past of the third century of our era, but clearly a man of substance in his own time. But how he came to hide his title deeds and important orders behind him when he passed from the knowledge of men there is no means of knowing.

Of records of this sort the explorer found many hundreds in many languages and covering a wide range of time whenever it was possible to establish limiting dates. Sometimes the dating proved quite impossible; at other times the presence of Chinese writing gave the exact year, for the Chinese have always been scrupulous in dating their writing. From such a find it has been possible to establish at least one limiting date of a collection of miscellanies.

These discoveries, interesting and valuable, would have proved sufficient reward for the hardships of the expedition; but there was a find yet to come, the like of which has never rewarded any archæologist.

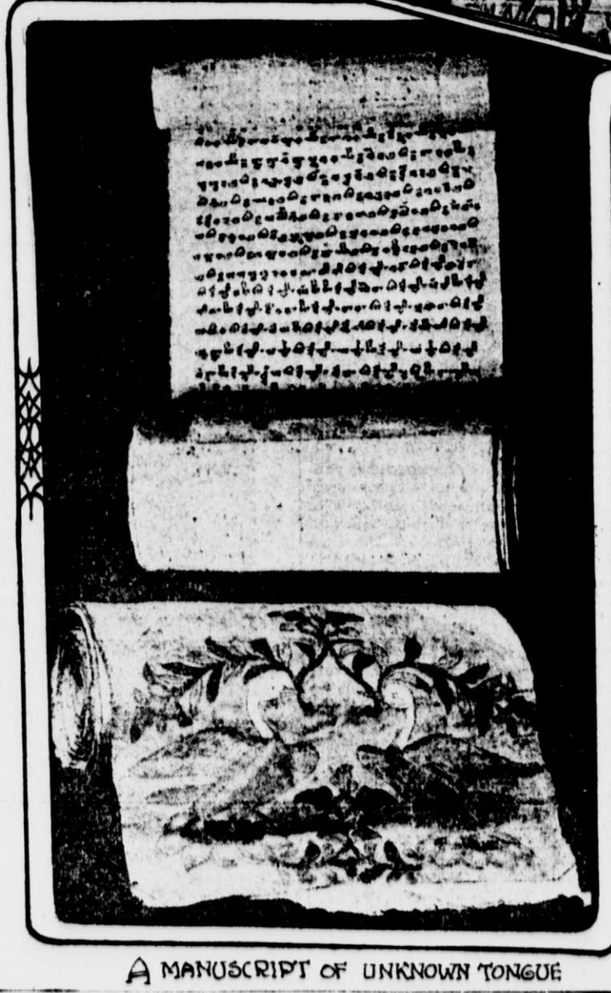
In the spring of 1907 Dr. Stein was at Tun-huang, close to the line of cliffs in which are carved the shrines which have given that seat of ancient worship the name of the Thousand Buddhas. In the town the explorer caught a rumor that in one of the grottoes of the holy place a secret chamber had recently been brought to light which was filled with a mass of manuscript said to be written in Chinese characters, but in a language which none could comprehend. In truly barbarian style the extent of the find was computed at about seven cartloads.

Work of the discovery had trickled to the provincial headquarters far away in Lan-chou, and the Amban, or district officer, had ordered a sample to be forwarded for his inspection. When he found the manuscripts nonsense so far as he was concerned he gave orders that they should be returned to the place where found and locked up. It scarcely seemed possible to Dr. Stein that this rumor could be true; he was fairly startled at the chance of finding a whole library out of the past where a handful of fragments would have been estimated a rich discovery.

WOODEN RECORDS OF 2000 YEARS AGO

THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS SHRINE.

THE HIDDEN TEMPLE LIBRARY.



A MANUSCRIPT OF UNKNOWN TONGUE

SUN SCORCHED SANDS OF GOBI

The temple, or rather the particular grotto in which this treasure was found to lie, was under the somewhat interrupted ministration of a Taoist priest, Wang Tao-shih, densely ignorant and wholly timorous. Fortunately Dr. Stein had for Chinese secretary a young man who had developed a compelling interest in the archæological research to which this desert employment had introduced him. This young student assumed the difficult diplomacy of overcoming the objections of the priest and in time obtained sight of the precious deposit. The result is set down in Dr. Stein's own narrative, "Ruins of Desert Cathay," which has just been published in London by the Macmillans and from an advance copy of which this narrative has been derived.

"Some hours later Chiang found the wall blocking the entrance to the recess of the temple removed, and on its door being opened by the priest caught a glimpse of a room crammed full to the roof with manuscript bundles. I had purposely kept away from the Tao-shih's temple all the forenoon, but on getting this news I could no longer restrain my impatience to see the great hoard myself. The day was cloudless and hot, and the soldiers who had followed me about during the morning with my cameras were now taking their siesta in sound sleep soothed by a good smoke of opium. So accompanied only by Chiang I went to the temple.

"I found the priest there evidently still combating his scruples and nervous apprehensions. But under the influence of that quasi-divine hint he now summoned up courage to open before me the rough door closing the narrow entrance which led from the side of the broad front passage into the rock carved recess on a level of about four feet above the floor of the former.

"The sight of the small room disclosed was one to make my eyes open wide. Heaped up in layers but without any order there appeared in the dim light of the priest's little lamp a solid mass of manuscript bundles rising to a height of nearly ten feet and filling, as subsequent measurement showed, close on to 500 cubic feet. The area left clear within the room was just sufficient for two people to stand in. It was manifest that in this black hole no examination of the manuscripts would be possible, and also that the digging out of all its contents would cost a good deal of physical labor.

"A suggestion to clear out all the bundles into the large cella of the cave temple, where they might have been examined at ease, would have been premature; so much oppressed at the time was Wang Tao-shih by fears of losing his position—and patrons—by the rumors which any casual observers might spread against him in the oasis. So for the present I had to rest content with his offer to take out a bundle or two at a time and to let us look rapdily through their contents in a less cramped part of the precincts.

"Fortunately the restorations carried out by him, besides the fine loggia, included a kind of large ante-chapel having on either side a small room provided with a door and paper covered windows. So here a convenient reading room was at hand for this strange old library, where we were screened from any inquisitive eyes even if an occasional worshipper dropped in to kotow before the huge and ugly from the condition of other caves near by and the relatively low level of this particular temple, it is probable that this accumulation of drift sand rose to ten feet or more at the entrance.

"Keeping only a few laborers at work from the proceeds of pious donations, at first coming driblet like with lamentable slowness, our Tao-shih had taken two or three years to lay bare the whole of the broad passage, some forty feet deep. When this task had been accomplished, and while engaged in setting up new statues in place of the decayed, old stucco images occupying the dais of the cella, he had noticed a small crack in the frescoed wall to the right of the passage. There appeared to be a recess behind the plastered surface instead of the solid conglomerate from which the cella and its approach are hewn, and on widening the opening he discovered the small room with its deposit such as I now saw it.

"Walled into the west face of the room had been found a large slab of black marble covered with a long and neatly engraved Chinese inscription. It had subsequently been removed and set up in a more accessible place on the left hand wall of the passage. This inscription records imperial eulogies of a Chinese pilgrim named Hung-pien who had visited India and after returning with relics and sacred texts had apparently settled at these shrines to devote his remaining years to translating and other pious labors. As it is dated in the year corresponding to A. D. 851 it was clear to me from the first that the deposit of the manuscripts must have taken place some time after the middle of the ninth century.

"All the manuscripts seemed to be preserved exactly in the same condition they were in when deposited. Some of the bundles were carelessly fastened with rough cords and without an outer cloth wrapper, but even this had failed to injure the paper. Nowhere could I trace the slightest effect of moisture. And, in fact, what better place for preserving such relics could be imagined than a chamber carved in the live rock of these terribly barren hills and hermetically shut off from what moisture, if any, the atmosphere of this desert valley ever contained? Not in the driest soil could relics of a ruined site have so completely escaped injury as they had here in a carefully selected rock chamber where, hidden behind a brick wall and protected by accumulated drift sand, these masses of manuscripts had lain undisturbed for centuries."

To the priest who served these mysteries in the desert wastes these treasures were no treasure at all. But then they were equally meaningless to the district official who had won his post by passing the long chain of examinations which lead to the administrative career in China. But the priest in the sands was under the obsession of several suspicions. These rolls meant naught to him, but they were in some sort a part of his temple furniture and he was shy about allowing them to pass out of his possession even into the next room for inspection.

Then he had to think of the members of his congregation. To them also the ancient rolls were wholly without sense; yet it frequently happens that the laity are even more orthodox than their spiritual pastors and masters, and Wang Tao-shih was clearly much alarmed lest his parishioners should discover that the sacrosanct deposit had been tampered with.

It was a long and a difficult negotiation, but the humble priest was no match for the facile Chinese secretary, Chiang. That adept individual had no theological illusions, therefore he was all the more ready to play upon the feelings of the stupid but devout Wang. The winning card was discovered by Chiang and quite by accident.

In reading the colophon of one of the first rolls examined that secretary found the statement that it contained a Chinese translation of one of the Indian sacred scriptures made by the devout Hsüan-tsang himself. Dr. Stein had long since taken this devout wanderer for the patron saint of his exploration and had come thousands of li in his footsteps and had been brought unerringly to this deposit of his holy labors. Wang also was enthusiastic in his admiration of the pious father of the Chinese Buddhism and had celebrated his deeds in garish frescoings of the ante-chapel.

In this he found the opportunity to save his face, to let the explorer have the pick of these hidden treasures and to accept the reward, yet throughout the transaction to preserve the appearance of a religious rite. The plea to which he yielded was that it was only right that this admirer of Hsüan, who had come the weary desert miles from India, should carry back to the seat of the faith these sacred memorials, should bear them yet further to a great temple of learning beyond the seas where the light might reach distant peoples. The result of the negotiations carried on for day after day, while Wang was sometimes swayed by his superstitious and other fears and sometimes overborne by the insidious suggestions of the shrewd and suave secretary, was that in due time the British Museum received in safety twenty-four great cases of manuscripts and five cases of painted and embroidered silk.

It will be years before the thousand of manuscripts which these cases brought out of the desert and out of antiquity can be deciphered and collated and edited and subjected to all the necessary processes which they must undergo in order to render their stores of information available. As yet they have barely been assorted for their first distribution. But enough has been revealed to disclose the fact that this is the greatest single discovery of any of the remains of the past.

Taking the great with the small the sum of this find, that is to say of so much of it as Dr. Stein was able to bring out into civilization, amounts to more than 14,000 pieces in about a dozen scripts and languages. This shows what a centre of information the Thousand Buddhas was while yet the civilization of inner Asia was alive. This cloister could have been in no backwater. The presence of the literary remains of a dozen languages shows that it was a busy corner on one of the great highways of the world at a time when our culture was in its infancy.

The Sanskrit find which will occupy the first place for general scholars in this temple library consists of a collection of seventy palm leaves, each twenty inches long, covered with small but beautifully clear writing. This has been identified as going back to the third or fourth century at the latest, the oldest specimen of the sacred speech of India and the foundation of comparative philology.

An interesting discovery in this library throws a new light on the art of printing. "Greatly delighted was I," writes Dr. Stein, "when I found that an excellently preserved roll with a well designed block-printed picture as frontispiece had its text printed throughout, showing a date of production corresponding to A. D. 880. Here was conclusive evidence that the art of printing books from wooden blocks was practised long before the conventionally assumed time of its invention, during the Sung period, and that already in the ninth century the technical level had been raised practically as high as the process permitted."

A large mass of material is written in one of the unknown languages once used in Eastern Turkestan. The existence of this language has been known for a few years from a few fragments. It had been inferred that the speech was Indo-European, yet nothing could be determined as to its affiliations or its relation with the Indian languages on one hand or the Iranian on the other.

Yet at the first investigation of this new material it is found that the Thousand Buddhas shrine has yielded two well preserved and practically complete translations of two well known Sanskrit texts, the Vajracchedika and the Aparamitayuh-sutra. Thus we have the equivalent of the Rosetta stone, the bilingual which is to lead to the unlocking of this forgotten speech.

A book roll about four inches broad, but close on fifteen feet long, is beautifully written in that peculiar form of Syriac or Estrangelo script which has been identified with the Manicheans. This roll contains the most complete text ever known of the Khuastanift or confession prayer of the Manichean laymen in its Turkish form. About one-tenth of the text has been lost at the beginning of the roll, but fragments from other sources serve to fill out this lacuna. With this is associable another volume written upon more than a hundred pages in Runic Turki, a collection of brief fables about men and animals.

These are but notes taken at random from the superficial appearance of these collections; no one yet can know what treasures may be found to exist in this library over which the Thousand Buddhas have kept watch and ward for a thousand years of desert calm. A civilization has come to its end and has passed from the memory of man. Its gardens under the pleasant shade of the mulberry trees have been buried in sand, the gritty blast has cut to pieces its perishable products and has sculptured into shapeless ruin its walls and its watch towers. But its religion has been preserved in death, and in its death has preserved the memorials of the race that is long past.

Chance, the chapter of accident, has brought these records to light and has given them to a new world for study. But it is to be said that never before has just such a chance happened to the most zealous explorer; not even the temple library of Nippur yielded to the archæologist such a rich reward as this which Dr. Stein found at the shrine of the Thousand Buddhas.